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A Disarming Lack of Candor

O THE EVE OF nuclear arms talks in Geneva, the Reagan administration is bending itself into knots trying to pretend that it has a coherent national security policy that could produce both an American "Star Wars" defense and a sweeping arms control agreement with the Soviet Union.

There are two possible explanations for the administration's gyrations. One — the most hopeful, but also the most unlikely — is that we are witnessing a surpassingly shrewd bargaining operation by a group of master poker players, who are maneuvering the Russians into historic negotiations that could actually reverse the arms race.

The second and more likely explanation is that we have entered a strategic Wonderland, guided by a president obsessed by a doubtful idea, who is advised by "experts" whose principal expertise is concocting "rationales that don't torture the facts too badly," as a Republican Senate aide put it last week.

President Reagan's idea that we can have Star Wars and negotiated disarmament, too, is considered implausible by nearly everyone who follows these issues closely from a vantage point anywhere outside the Reagan administration. Superhawks on Capitol Hill, arms controllers, experts and officials all over Western Europe, senior members of past administrations — and numerous officials in the present American government who are never heard from in public — consider this an unrealistic approach.

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The official talk this weekend is upbeat about arms control. But actually, Reagan administration policies, if pursued, will unravel the principal accomplishment of all previous arms control negotiations, the 1972 ABM treaty banning most deployments and testing of anti-missile missiles.

Here again the administration's position is cynical. We are assured — by Reagan, by Nitze and others — that the United States will adhere to the ABM Treaty. But the Star Wars portion of the administration's 1986 defense budget now pending in Congress contains money for the development of "prototypes" of new defensive weapons that violate Article V of the treaty, which commits both countries "not to develop, test or deploy ABM systems or components which are sea-based, air-based, space-based or mobile land-based." These prototypes in the '86 budget, if approved by Congress, could be tested by 1990 — the effective duration, apparently, of the promises to adhere to the treaty.

Our European allies recognize that there is no way to make Star Wars and the ABM Treaty compatible. That is why Margaret Thatcher has sought President Reagan's pledge that he would negotiate with the Soviets before deploying a Star Wars system. The British hope that such negotiations would somehow preserve the existing arms control regime. But can anyone imagine that the United States would spend up to \$100 billion to develop a plausible Star Wars system (a conservative estimate of the development cost), and then drop the whole idea because the Soviets declined to accept its introduction after negotiations?

If the ABM treaty must go, many important officials of the Reagan administration won't mind. For despite the reassuring public rhetoric, this American government is filled with people who don't really believe in arms control, and actually prefer to live with the Russians on the basis of bad relations and vigorous competition.

Arnold Horelick, formerly the CIA's national intelligence officer for the Soviet Union and now with the Rand Corp., has described the hard-line element in the administration as convinced that the current strategic trends favor the United States. In this view, we'll be relatively better off five or 10 years from now than we are now, so why rush into new agreements with the Soviets based on today's balance of power?

There is no visible cause for optimism about the arms negotiations beginning this week in Geneva. Specialists in NATO foreign ministries and many working-level officials in the United States government agree that there are no real prospects for making a deal unless the Reagan administration is willing to adhere to the ABM treaty and give up active development of the defensive weapons which it bans. But President Reagan specifically rules out using his Star Wars program as a bargaining chip.

The great irony is that the current strategic trends probably are favorable — not if the objective is to gain a meaningful American advantage, but to get negotiated arms reductions under way. The Russians are anxious to avoid a whole new competition in space — the threat of Star Wars has indeed gotten their attention, and it re-

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